

## **Student and Community Partner Expectations for Effective Community-Engaged Learning Partnerships**

Holly Stack-Cutler and Sara Dorow

To view the poster: <http://www.engagementscholarship.org/Upload/PosterAwards/2011/Stack-CutlerDorow.pdf>

Student insight and community partner feedback can contribute to understanding and thus improve community-engaged learning practices. Student and community partner voices, however, are not often heard during community-engaged learning development. To ascertain student and community partner expectations for community-engaged learning, thematic analysis was performed on data from two sources: a workshop where five student panelists involved in community-engaged learning discussed their expectations of community-engaged learning, and a survey of community partners ( $n = 45$ ) to examine perspectives on working with students and university partners during community-engaged learning placements.

### **Student Findings**

From their community placements, students expected opportunities to acquire management skills, to exercise leadership skills, and to be given responsibility. They further expected to be exposed to a variety of perspectives on how others view their expertise, and to have an involved community supervisor who would give an orientation of the organization, provide ongoing supervision, and highlight the significance of the work students would perform in their community-engaged learning placement. Students considered their placement to be a safe environment where they could challenge themselves, test learned skills in a professional setting, and connect faces and stories to theories learned in the classroom. To successfully negotiate community and university expectations, students recommended taking ownership of placement experiences and being responsible for one's own work; having ongoing conversations to ensure that one's own and community partners' expectations are being met; learning theory in the classroom and engaging in practicum preparation; using problem-solving skills to navigate unexpected situations; and exploring future opportunities to hone skills.

## Community Partner Findings

Community partners appreciated having flexible timeframes and being able to negotiate length of community-engaged learning placements with university partners based on their organization's needs. Traits that they attributed to effective community-engaged learning placements and partnerships were grouped into three areas: placement characteristics, student characteristics, and university partner characteristics. Effective community-engaged learning placements had specific outcomes, were mutually beneficial for organization and university partners, did not require financial support from the organization, and had good community mentors available for students. Effective community-engaged learning students were knowledgeable about and responsible for meeting placement expectations; came to the placement with adequate background, skills, and pre-training; were enthusiastic, motivated, and ready to learn; and had an interest in the organization and their placement tasks. Effective university partners conducted ongoing student supervision during placements, supported students to help them get the most out of their experiences, and shared students' progress with community partners through reports.

## Conclusion

To foster effective community-engaged learning partnerships, universities need structures for students to (1) share past community-engaged learning experiences with other students and prepare for community-engaged learning placements; (2) have mutually beneficial conversations with community partners; (3) negotiate with university partners; and (4) receive mentoring and support from university and community partners. Further, universities need to establish structures that enable ongoing conversations between community partners and university partners. University and community partners need to provide feedback, share what they have learned about making student engagement work, and negotiate community-engaged learning placement timelines.

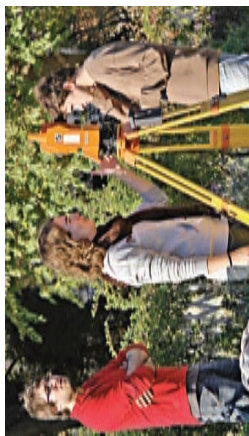
## About the Authors

**Holly Stack-Cutler** is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Educational Psychology at the University of Alberta. Her research interests include community-based research with vulnerable populations, community-engaged learning, and resilience and social capital of adults with reading difficulties. Stack-Cutler earned her M.A. and M.Ed. at Brock University.

**Sara Dorow** is an associate professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Alberta. Her research and teaching are guided by interests in the political economy of im/migration; neoliberal globalization; practices and imaginaries of community; processes of racialization; and constructions of kinship, gender, and childhood. Three areas of scholarship define her current work: globalization and community, transnational adoption, and scholarship of engagement/community service-learning. Dorow earned her Ph.D. in sociology from the University of Minnesota.

# STUDENT AND COMMUNITY PARTNER EXPECTATIONS FOR EFFECTIVE COMMUNITY-ENGAGED LEARNING PARTNERSHIPS

Holly Stack-Cutler, PhD Candidate, & Sara Dorow, PhD, University of Alberta, Edmonton, AB, Canada



## INTRODUCTION

- Encouraging student insight and community partner feedback into their community-engaged learning (CEL) experiences can lead to understanding promising learning practices. However, students and community partners' voices are not often heard during CEL development.

## RESEARCH DATA & METHODS

We conducted a thematic analysis on two types of data:

- 5 students from Business, Law, Biological Sciences, Arts, and Human Ecology) with experience in co-op, practicum, and service-learning placements discussed CEL expectations and experiences negotiating community and university CEL expectations
- 4 non-peer-participating community partners (volunteer, recreation, social services, and business) discussed characteristics of effective student placements from the perspective of their organizations

## FINDINGS

### I. Student Perspectives on CEL - Placement Expectations

#### A Safe Environment to Learn Skills and Challenge Themselves

- Students expected to acquire management skills, exercise leadership skills, and be given responsibility
- Students considered their placement to be a safe environment where they could take risks, challenge themselves, and try new things.

"I think that the bigger expectations were that I would have some responsibility and some opportunity to learn. I was not really sure what that meant, but I think that was the main thing. I think that you will be respected for your qualifications that you bring to it and that you'll be given ample opportunities to really get your feet wet."

#### Opportunity to Put Classroom Learning into Practice

- Students expected their placement to be a place where they could test learned skills, and abilities in a professional setting.
- Experiences in the real world meant students could attach faces and stories to theories learned in the classroom to more fully develop their understanding of a topic.

#### Exposure to Multiple Perspectives

- Students expected to get a variety of perspectives on how others view their expertise and areas of interest.
- Students recommended being open to new experiences and learning from mentors and the people one will meet in a community placement.

#### An Involved Community Supervisor

- Students expected their placement supervisor to provide an orientation of the organization and the tasks expected of them, provide on-going supervision, and highlight the significance of their work/duties.
- "For my supervisor I expected maybe to have a little bit of direction, a little bit of structure, maybe an orientation in the beginning, and then to be really helpful and to be really supportive. To know the people of my work better than just being delegated to a task and being left by myself."

## II. Community Partner Perspectives on CEL Partnerships

Community partners appreciated being able to negotiate the length of CEL placement based on their organization's needs (see Figure 1). Key characteristics of CEL partnerships were grouped into three areas: placement, student, and university partner (see Figure 2).

Figure 1. Community Partners' Ideal Length of CEL Placements

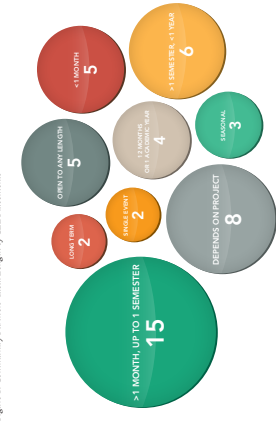
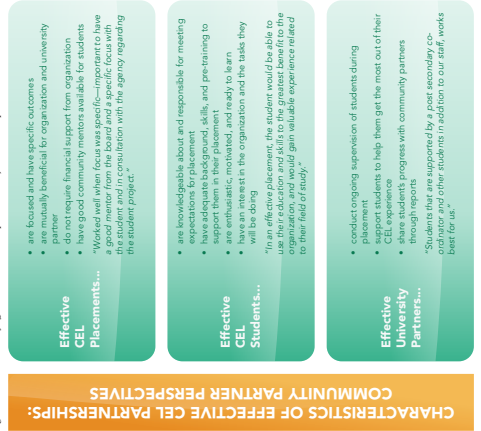


Figure 2. Characteristics of Effective CEL Partnerships: Community Partner Perspectives



## DISCUSSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

Students expect their CEL placements to provide them with opportunities to "marry" theory and practice (Hall & Hollander, 2006; Ralph et al., 2008), develop and test new skills, and build relationships with community partners and university staff (Sawyer & Holland, 2006).

- Through CEL partnerships community partners expect to mentor motivated students, have ongoing communication with university staff, and share mutually beneficial outcomes
- University partners expect to have students who are motivated, have good academic outcomes with both students and university partners (Cone & Payne, 2002)
- Universities need to have structures for students to (a) share past CEL experiences with other students and negotiate for CEL placements, (b) have mutually beneficial conversations with community partners (c) prepare with university partners and (d) receive mentoring and support from university and university partners and provide feedback; (b) share what they have learned about making student engagement work and (c) negotiate CEL placement time lines.

## REFERENCES

- Cone, D., & Payne, J. (2002). When campus and community collide: Campus-community partnerships from a community perspective. *The Journal of Public Affairs*, 6, 203-217.
- Liederman, S., Jeros, A., Zopf, D., & Goss, M. (2002). *Building partnerships with college campuses: Community perspectives*. Washington, DC: The Council of Independent Colleges.
- Ralph, L., Walker, K., & Wimmer, K. (2008). The pre-service practitioner: Perspectives of students from three disciplines. *Higher Education Perspectives*, 4(1).
- Sawyer, J., & Holland, J. (2006). How campuses can create engaged citizens: The student view. *Journal of College of Chalmers*, 7.
- Stack-Cutler, H., & Dorow, S. (2010). Community and campus ground: Community partner perspectives on campus-community partnerships. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 13(1), 30-43.

## STUDENT SUGGESTIONS FOR NEGOTIATING COMMUNITY AND UNIVERSITY EXPECTATIONS

### Actively Prepare and Communicate

- actively ask questions to clarify community partner's expectations
- communicate with community partners before and during placement—to ensure more and mutual understanding of expectations before placement
- talk to other students in class and monitoring professor before starting placement
- take ownership of placement experiences and be responsible for own work

### Critically Engage with Community Experiences

- learn theory in the classroom and engage in practice in preparation
- learn that theory learned in books does not always dictate placement realities
- use problem-solving skills to navigate unexpected situations and challenges

### Explore Future Opportunities

- communicate with community partners about future employment, continue to hone skills while the community partner receives service from a trained individual
- "I am a big talker and communicator so I was able to just say 'what do you want me to do?' and 'what are you expecting?' so we had a lot of conversations, me and my supervisor, about what she was hoping to get and what I was hoping to get. And we did some negotiating along the way because things came up."
- "We did have a lot of conversations about what we were doing and what we were not doing, and we were able to negotiate work on the same time line...and world time then until September in April."

For more information contact Holly Stack-Cutler at [hstack@ualberta.ca](mailto:hstack@ualberta.ca)  
Poster can be found at NCEL Resources at <http://www.arts.ualberta.ca/nceel/blog/>



To view the poster: <http://www.engagementscholarship.org/Upload/PosterAwards/2011/Stack-CutlerDorow.pdf>